

## Reading Group Guide

## Spotlight on: *Water for Elephants*

### Author: Sara Gruen

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Career: Writer.

**Name:** Sara Gruen  
**Born:** Canada  
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### Writings:

*Riding Lessons* (novel), HarperTorch (New York, NY), 2004.

### Works in Progress:

*Flying Changes*, a sequel to *Riding Lessons*.

### Sidelights:

Sara Gruen's debut novel, *Riding Lessons*, concerns an Olympic-level rider named Annemarie Zimmer, who loses her prized horse and her promising career in a terrible accident. The incident proves to be the first link in a chain of events that culminates two decades later. At that point, Annemarie has lost her job, is in the midst of a divorce from her husband, and has discovered that her father is terminally ill. Taking her highly rebellious, teenaged daughter with her, she returns to her parents' riding school in New Hampshire to regroup. There, she encounters a former love interest, Dan Garibaldi. She also finds a neglected horse with rare, brindled coloring; it is the same coat pattern as Highland Harry, her mount who died in the accident twenty years before. The coloration is so unusual that Annemarie feels there must be a connection between the two animals, and she becomes determined to discover what it is. Eventually, she learns that the horse is Harry's brother.

"*Riding Lessons* is an exciting character study that uses the equestrian world as a backdrop to a family drama," mused Harriet Klausner in a review for AllReaders.com. The reviewer praised the "vivid story line" and the author's "insight into the heroine who remains the center of a powerful tale of redemption." Jill M. Smith, a contributor to RomanticTimes.com, advised that "painful estranged relationships form the core of this emotionally complex and dark novel." A contributor to *Publishers Weekly* wrote that *Riding Lessons* is "beautifully nuanced," and added: "The book's appealing horse scenes depicted with unsentimental affection help build a moving story of loss, survival and renewal." Finally, a *Booklist* writer praised Gruen's writing skill, calling *Riding Lessons* "so exquisitely written it's hard to believe that it's also a debut."



## Author: Sara Gruen (2)

### Further Readings About the Author:

#### Periodicals:

*Booklist*, April, 2004, review of *Riding Lessons*, p. 1355.

*Publishers Weekly*, March 1, 2004, review of *Riding Lessons*, p. 55.

#### Online:

AllReaders.com, <http://www.allreaders.com/> (December 14, 2004), Harriet Klausner, review of *Riding Lessons*.

ReadersRead.com, <http://www.readersread.com/> (December 14, 2004), Sarah Reaves White, review of *Riding Lessons*.

RomanticTimes.com, <http://www.romantictimes.com/> (December 14, 2004), Jill M. Smith, review of *Riding Lessons*.

Sara Gruen Home page, <http://www.gruenzoo.com> (November 30, 2004).\*

Source:† Contemporary Authors Online, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Source Database:† Contemporary Authors Online



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### Reviews:

#### *Booklist* Reviews: April 15, 2006

Life is good for Jacob Jankowski. He's about to graduate from veterinary school and about to bed the girl of his dreams. Then his parents are killed in a car crash, leaving him in the middle of the Great Depression with no home, no family, and no career. Almost by accident, Jacob joins the circus. There he falls in love with the beautiful performer Marlena, who is married to the circus' psychotic animal trainer. He also meets the other love of his life, Rosie the elephant. This lushly romantic novel travels back in forth in time between Jacob's present day in a nursing home and his adventures in the surprisingly harsh world of 1930s circuses. The ending of both stories is a little too cheerful to be believed, but just like a circus, the magic of the story and the writing convince you to suspend your disbelief. The book is partially based on real circus stories and illustrated with historical circus photographs. ((Reviewed April 15, 2006)) Copyright 2006 *Booklist* Reviews.

#### *Library Journal* Reviews: March 15, 2006

When his parents are killed in a traffic accident, Jacob Jankowski hops a train after walking out on his final exams at Cornell, where he had hoped to earn a veterinary degree. The train turns out to be a circus train, and since it's the Depression, when someone with a vet's skills can attach himself to a circus if he's lucky, Jacob soon finds himself involved with the animal acts—specifically with the beautiful young Marlena, the horse rider, and her husband, August. Jacob falls for Marlena immediately, and the ensuing triangle is at the center of this novel, which follows the circus across the states. Jacob learns the ins and outs of circus life, in this case under the rule of the treacherous Uncle Al, who cheats the workers and deals roughly with patrons who complain about blatant false advertising and rip-off exhibits. Jacob and Marlena are attracted to each other, but their relationship is fairly innocent until it becomes clear that August is not merely jealous but dangerously mentally deranged. Old-fashioned and endearing, this is an enjoyable, fast-paced story told by the older Jacob, now in his nineties in a nursing home. From the author of *Riding Lessons*; recommended for all libraries.—Jim Coan, SUNY Coll. at Oneonta [Page 62]. Copyright 2006 Reed Business Information.

#### *BookPage* Reviews: July 2006

Sara Gruen almost ran away from her Depression-era circus Sara Gruen keeps her cat's ashes in an urn behind her desk and donates a portion of her book royalties to animal charities. It's not terribly surprising, then, that one of the most memorable characters in this animal lover's new novel is a pachyderm named Rosie.

"I've always been a complete sucker for animals," says Gruen, whose novel *Water for Elephants* has garnered considerable buzz for its offbeat story of a Depression-era traveling circus. "I didn't realize that maybe other people weren't until recently. I've always been 'Feed the wild ones, tame the stray ones.' "

Gruen's own menagerie, which she shares with her husband and three young sons, includes four cats, a dog, a horse and goats. Gruen spoke with *BookPage* recently from her home in an environmental community north of Chicago, where the residents live in energy-efficient homes and share an organic farm and a charter school. It was in this bucolic setting that Gruen started writing her third novel (following *Riding Lessons* and *Flying Changes*) after intensive research that included several family visits to circus shows. But *Water for Elephants* almost didn't happen: Distraction after distraction kept Gruen from finishing the book, including the usual family



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illnesses and a technical-writing project that dragged on for four months.

"I found it very difficult to get back into the characters," she recalls. "I almost gave it up."

Gruen laughs as she explains the sensory-deprivation method she finally employed to buckle down and finish the book, she moved her desk to a walk-in closet, covered the window, turned off the phones and wore earplugs.

"I hope to never have to do that again!" she says.

The result was worth the struggle. *Water for Elephants* is the remarkable, captivating story of the Benzini Brothers Most Spectacular Show on Earth, a 1930s traveling circus fighting to stay solvent during the Great Depression. Gruen brings to life a fascinating, nearly forgotten world of big tops and bearded ladies, in a time when the circus coming to town was a rare treat for those suffering through one of the bleakest chapters in our nation's history. The story is also a bittersweet statement on growing old in modern America. Jacob Jankowski, who is either 90 or 93 years old (he's not entirely sure anymore), whiles away his days in a nursing home, missing his wife and his life. His children and grandchildren come to visit, but he finds it increasingly difficult to keep them all straight. When a traveling circus sets up in the parking lot next to his residence, his shaky mind is transported back to his days as the Benzini circus veterinarian.

After young Jacob's parents die in a car accident, he abandons his veterinary studies at Cornell and hops a Benzini train. He is soon taking care of a host of big cats, monkeys and horses, and spending his nights with the circus crew drinking bottles of the foulest bootleg imaginable. Jacob is quickly captivated by Marlena, the lovely but married star of the Benzini show. Her husband August is a dashing, vicious man who trains (and often beats) the circus animals. Rosie, the prized elephant that the Benzini show bought from a failed competitor, is often at the wrong end of August's wrath. Eventually, so is Jacob. Gruen was one day away from starting a new novel on an entirely different topic when she read a newspaper feature about famed circus photographer Edward J. Kelty. In the years after World War I, Kelty followed circuses around the country, capturing mesmerizing images of sword swallowers, giants and midgets. Gruen saw Kelty's work and thought, "Wow! I could put a novel in that." She set aside her other project and began researching the unique community of circus workers.

"I wanted to preserve a snapshot of that very extreme culture, because it's gone," she says.

The book is stuffed with authentic, largely forgotten details about life during the Depression. Gruen writes about a grizzled circus worker named Camel suffering from "Jake Leg." The condition afflicted tens of thousands of people who drank a Jamaican ginger extract during Prohibition, not knowing that it could cause paralysis. Getting the historical details right was painstaking work, but Gruen found she had no trouble capturing the nuances of Jacob, a crotchety nonagenarian. "He was the one who was just there," she says. "I think it scared my husband. I just turned on the tap and there's this cantankerous old man."

"It was much more difficult to write the historical chapters," she says. "You know, was there running water in a 1930s train car? I would finish those chapters with my tongue hanging out. Then I'd reach the safety of Jacob's nursing home." Some of the history included in the book, such as Jake Leg and the rampant abuse of circus animals and workers, is haunting, but Gruen doesn't flinch from that reality. In one of the book's many poignant moments, Jacob discovers why the elephant Rosie is so seemingly ill-suited for circus life, leading to her many beatings at the hands of August. In her author's note, Gruen makes clear that such abuse is historically accurate.





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A 1930s elephant named Topsy killed her trainer after he fed her a lit cigarette. "Topsy's owners at Coney Island's Luna Park decided to turn her execution into a public spectacle," Gruen writes. "But the announcement that they were going to hang her met with uproar, after all, wasn't hanging a cruel and unusual punishment?" The elephant was electrocuted in front of 1,500 spectators. Sad? Absolutely. But if anything, discovering such stories while writing *Water for Elephants* only intensified Gruen's devotion to animals. "I came into this project loving elephants, but now I'm absolutely besotted," Gruen laughs. Amy Scribner writes from Olympia, Washington. Copyright 2006 *BookPage* Reviews.

#### *Kirkus* Reviews: March 15, 2006

Gruen (*Riding Lesson*, not reviewed) brings to life the world of a Depression-era traveling circus. Jacob Jankowski, a retired veterinarian living out his days in an assisted-living facility, drifts in and out of his memories: Only days before graduating from vet school in 1931, young Jake learns his parents have died and left him penniless. Leaving school, he hops a train that happens to belong to the Benzini Brothers Most Spectacular Show on Earth. When the circus's owner, Uncle Al, learns Jake's educational background, he quickly hires him as the circus vet. This position allows Jake access to the various strata of circus society, from lowly crewmembers who seldom see actual money in their pay envelopes to the performers and managers who drink champagne and dress in evening wear for dinner. Jake is soon in love, both with Marlena, an equestrienne married to the head animal trainer, August, and with Rosie, an elephant who understands only Polish (which Polish-American Jake conveniently speaks). At first, August and Marlena seem happily married, but Jake soon realizes that August's charm can quickly turn to cruelty. He is charismatic but bipolar (subtle echoes of *Sophie's Choice*). Worse, he beats Rosie, and comes across as having no love for animals. When August assumes Marlena and Jake are fooling around—having acknowledged their feelings, they have allowed themselves only a kiss—he beats Marlena, and she leaves him. Uncle Al tries blackmailing Jake to force him to reunite Marlena with August for the sake of the circus. Jake does not comply, and one fatality leads to another until the final blowup. The leisurely recreation of the circus's daily routine is lovely and mesmerizing, even if readers have visited this world already in fiction and film, but the plot gradually bogs down in melodrama and disintegrates by its almost saccharine ending. Despite genuine talent, Gruen misses the mark. Copyright *Kirkus* 2006 *Kirkus*/BPI Communications. All rights reserved.

#### *Publishers Weekly* Reviews: March 1, 2006

With its spotlight on elephants, Gruen's romantic page-turner hinges on the human-animal bonds that drove her debut and its sequel (*Riding Lessons* and *Flying Changes*)—but without the mass appeal that horses hold. The novel, told in flashback by nonagenarian Jacob Jankowski, recounts the wild and wonderful period he spent with the Benzini Brothers Most Spectacular Show on Earth, a traveling circus he joined during the Great Depression. When 23-year-old Jankowski learns that his parents have been killed in a car crash, leaving him penniless, he drops out of Cornell veterinary school and parlays his expertise with animals into a job with the circus, where he cares for a menagerie of exotic creatures, including an elephant who only responds to Polish commands. He also falls in love with Marlena, one of the show's star performers—a romance complicated by Marlena's husband, the unbalanced, sadistic circus boss who beats both his wife and the animals Jankowski cares for. Despite her often clichéd prose and the predictability of the story's ending, Gruen skillfully humanizes the midgets, drunks, rubes and freaks who populate her book. (May 26) [Page 47]. Copyright 2006 Reed Business Information.

#### *VOYA* Reviews: October 2006



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### Reviews: (continued)

Just as the smell of popcorn and the allure of fiery sword swallowers and exotic animals once drew spectators to the big top, readers will be drawn to this story of life in a traveling circus during the Depression. After Jacob Jankowski's parents die in a tragic car accident, the bank repossesses their home, which had been mortgaged to finance Jacob's veterinary studies. Jacob jumps a train carrying the Benzini Brothers Most Spectacular Show on Earth and is hired on because of his veterinary skills. The circus world is not all glamour and glitz, Jacob soon learns, but a hardscrabble life where both animals and workers are exploited and often mistreated. The author brings alive the circus culture with historical details and a wonderful menagerie of characters, including Uncle Al, the unscrupulous business manager; Kinko, a bitter dwarf; Marlena, the beautiful horse-riding star of the show; and Rosie, an elephant with personality and a secret. The story is told in flashback, through the eyes of Jacob, now ninety-three years old and in an assisted-living facility. His memory is jolted by the arrival of a circus in the parking lot nearby and his mind wanders back in time. The book's many complex layers—adventure, love, history, suspense, and a surprise ending—and Gruen's sensual prose are enhanced by period archive circus photographs at the beginning of each chapter. Mature readers will probably most enjoy this adult novel, but students interested in the 1930s or animals will also be fascinated by Gruen's tale.—Kim Zach 5Q 3P S A/YA Copyright 2006 *VOYA Reviews*.



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### Summary:

Though he may not speak of them, the memories still dwell inside Jacob Jankowski's ninety-something-year-old mind. Memories of himself as a young man, tossed by fate onto a rickety train that was home to the Benzini Brothers Most Spectacular Show on Earth. Memories of a world filled with freaks and clowns, with wonder and pain and anger and passion; a world with its own narrow, irrational rules, its own way of life, and its own way of death. The world of the circus: to Jacob it was both salvation and a living hell.

Jacob was there because his luck had run out— orphaned and penniless, he had no direction until he landed on this locomotive “ship of fools.” It was the early part of the Great Depression, and everyone in this third-rate circus was lucky to have any job at all. Marlena, the star of the equestrian act, was there because she fell in love with the wrong man, a handsome circus boss with a wide mean streak. And Rosie the elephant was there because she was the great gray hope, the new act that was going to be the salvation of the circus; the only problem was, Rosie didn’t have an act—in fact, she couldn’t even follow instructions. The bond that grew among this unlikely trio was one of love and trust, and ultimately, it was their only hope for survival.

Surprising, poignant, and funny, *Water for Elephants* is that rare novel with a story so engrossing, one is reluctant to put it down; with characters so engaging, they continue to live long after the last page has been turned; with a world built of wonder, a world so real, one starts to breathe its air.

### Discussion Questions:

1. To what extent do the chapters concerning the elderly Jacob enhance the chapters recounting the young Jacob's experiences with the Benzini Brothers circus? In what ways do the chapters about the young Jacob contribute to a deeper understanding of the elderly Jacob's life?
2. How does the novel's epigraph, the quote from Dr. Seuss's *Horton Hatches the Egg*, apply to the novel? What are the roles and importance of faithfulness and loyalty in *Water for Elephants*? In what ways does Gruen contrast the antagonisms and cruelties of circus life with the equally impressive loyalties and instances of caring?
3. Who did you, upon reading the prologue, think murdered August? What effect did that opening scene of chaos and murder have on your reception of the story that follows?
4. In connection with Jacob's formal dinner with August and Marlena in their stateroom, Jacob remarks, “August is gracious, charming, and mischievous” (page 93). To what extent is this an adequate characterization of August? How would you expand upon Jacob's observation? How would you characterize August? Which situations in the novel reveal his true character?
5. August says of Marlena, “Not everyone can work with liberty horses. It's a God-given talent, a sixth sense, if you will” (page 94). Both August and Jacob recognize Marlena's skills, her “sixth sense,” in working with the horses. In what ways does that sixth sense attract each man? How do August and Jacob differ in terms of the importance each places on Marlena's abilities?
6. After Jacob puts Silver Star down, August talks with him about the reality of the circus. “The whole thing's illusion, Jacob,” he says, “and there's nothing wrong with that. It's what people want from us. It's what they expect” (page 104). How does Gruen contrast the worlds of reality and illusion in the novel? Is there anything wrong with pandering to people's need for illusion? Why do we crave the illusions that the circus represents?



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7. Reflecting on the fact that his platitudes and stories don't hold his children's interest, the elderly Jacob notes, "My real stories are all out of date. So what if I can speak firsthand about the Spanish flu, the advent of the automobile, world wars, cold wars, guerrilla wars, and Sputnik—that's all ancient history now. But what else do I have to offer?" (page 110). How might we learn to appreciate the stories and life lessons of our elders and encourage people younger than ourselves to appreciate our own?
8. Looking at himself in the mirror, the old Jacob tries "to see beyond the sagging flesh." But he claims, "It's no good.... I can't find myself anymore. When did I stop being me?" (page 111). How would you answer that question for Jacob or any individual, or for yourself?
9. In what ways and to what degree do Uncle Al's maneuvers and practices regarding the defunct Fox Brothers circus reflect traditional American business practices? How would you compare his behavior with that of major businessmen and financiers of today? What alternative actions would you prefer?
10. As he lies on his bedroll, after his night with Barbara and Nell, Jacob cannot empty his mind of troubling visions and he reflects that "the more distressing the memory, the more persistent its presence" (page 143). How might the elderly Jacob's memories corroborate or contradict this observation? What have been your experiences and observations in this regard?
11. In his *Carnival of the Animals*, Ogden Nash wrote, "Elephants are useful friends." In what ways is Rosie a "useful" friend? What is Rosie's role in the events that follow her acquisition by Uncle Al?
12. After Jacob successfully coaches August in Polish commands for Rosie, he observes, "It's only when I catch Rosie actually purring under August's loving ministrations that my conviction starts to crumble. And what I'm left looking at in its place is a terrible thing" (page 229). What is Jacob left "looking at," how does it pertain to August's personality and Jacob's relationship with August, and what makes it a "terrible thing"?
13. How did you react to the redlighting of Walter and Camel, and eight others, off the trestle? How might we see Uncle Al's cutthroat behavior as "an indictment of a lifetime spent feigning emotions to make a buck" (in the words of one reviewer)?
14. After the collapse of the Benzini Brothers circus and Uncle Al's having "done a runner" (page 314), Jacob realizes, "Not only am I unemployed and homeless, but I also have a pregnant woman, bereaved dog, elephant, and eleven horses to take care of" (page 317). What expectations did you entertain for Jacob and Marlena's—and their menagerie's—future after they leave the Benzini Brothers circus? How do the elderly Jacob's memories of Marlena and their life together confirm or alter those expectations?
15. At the end of the novel, Jacob exclaims, "So what if I'm ninety-three?... why the hell shouldn't I run away with the circus?" (page 331). What would you project to be the elderly Jacob's experiences after he runs away with the circus the second time? How does his decision reflect what we have learned about his early years?
16. Sara Gruen has said that the "backbone" of her novel "parallels the biblical story of Jacob," in the book of Genesis. On the first night after his leaving Cornell, for example, Jacob—as did his biblical namesake—lies "back on the bank, resting my head on a flat stone" (page 23). In what other ways does *Water for Elephants* parallel the story of the biblical Jacob? How do the names of many of the characters reflect names of characters in the biblical account?





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17. In the words of one reviewer, *Water for Elephants* “explores... the pathetic grandeur of the Depression-era circus.” In what ways and to what extent do the words “pathetic grandeur” describe the world that Gruen creates in her novel?

These book-group discussion questions were prepared by Hal Hager, of Hal Hager & Associates, Somerville, New Jersey.